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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000008

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SUBJECT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 2008 IRANIAN MAJLES ELECTIONS

REF: RPO DUBAI 0004

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence
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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S) Summary: The results of the 2008 Majles elections in Iran will have little to no immediate bearing on Iranian foreign or nuclear policy, on which the Majles has little impact, but may foreshadow the likely result of the 2009 presidential election. Numerous contacts report that the Iranian public appears to have scant interest in the Majles elections and expects to see little change. Although the Majles does have some institutional powers, these powers are largely limited to domestic policy. That said, the elections are a valuable barometer in the shaping of political alliances and pre-positioning for the 2009 presidential elections, as well as a glimpse inside current power relationships. Furthermore, cabinet members often are chosen from among the parliamentary leadership. The reformers are unlikely to gain many seats, but the triumvirate of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Mehdi Karrubi appears to yield political influence. End summary.

2.(C) The March 14 Iranian Majles elections will not likely result in any significant immediate changes in the country's foreign or nuclear policy, as the Majles has limited impact on those areas. In addition, numerous contacts have told IRPO that the Iranian public appears to have scant interest in the Majles elections and expects to see little change. (Comment: This reportedly scant interest among the Iranian public in the elections does not necessarily translate into a low voter turnout. The Islamic Republic has had voter participation numbers of 50-60% in most elections, and the Iranian government strongly encourages high turnouts, since it views voter participation as a reflection of systemic legitimacy. End comment.)

3.(S//NF) Oppositionist Ebrahim Yazdi (please protect), leader of the banned political party Freedom Party and former Islamic Republic of Iran Foreign Minister, told IRPO Febraury 20 that he attaches little importance to the Majles elections. Despite the

reinstatement of several hundred previously disqualified reformist candidates, he did not expect there would be competitive elections in most districts. Yazdi added that although his Freedom Party registered some candidates for the elections, they were disqualified, as expected for a banned political party. (Yazdi's views on US policy and Iran's political future are reported septel.)

Political alliances

4.(C) The significance of these elections and all the politicking preceding them is largely in the shaping of political alliances. Although the Majles has institutional powers, these powers are largely limited to domestic policy. The reformist-centrist triumvirate formed by former president Khatami, Expediency Council chair Rafsanjani, and former Majles speaker Karrubi has some influence, largely derived from the personal influence of the three leaders. However, despite strenuous lobbying efforts by reformists and Rafsanjani for reversal of disqualifications, the reformists will not be able to field candidates in all constituencies. Politically speaking, the reformist-centrist triumvirate is out-flanked by a conservative-pragmatist triumvirate of former National Security Council secretary Larijani, Tehran mayor Qalibaf, and former IRGC commander Rezaie. The latter grouping is providing an alternative to the more hardline conservatives associated with President Ahmadinejad. A coalition called the Broad and Popular Coalition of Principle-ists (BPCP, sometimes translated as the Comprehensive Coalition of Principle-ists) has been formed by Larijani, Rezaie, and Qalibaf, reportedly as a result of disagreements with the existing United Front of Principle-ists (UFP) which includes several conservative groups that are largely pro-Ahmadinejad. There are also a few other smaller conservative groups, such as the Independent Principle-ists led by MP Ahmad Tavakkoli, and the Progressive Principle-ist Front led by former intelligence minister Ali Fallahian that remain separate from the UFP and BPCP.

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Vetting

15. (S//NF) Candidates were first examined by Executive Councils run by the Interior Ministry and subsequently by Supervisory Councils, which answer to the Guardian Council (GC). Then, the Guardian Council itself examined the candidacies. A majority of reformist candidates were initially disqualified, many for having "legal records," although it was reportedly not made clear to candidates what this meant. Some were also disqualified because their adherence to Islam was in question.

16. (S//NF) Khatami, Rafsanjani, and Karrubi found some unusual allies in lobbying to overturn the mass vetting of candidates by the Interior Ministry -- several prominent conservatives including Deputy Majles speaker Mohammad Reza Bahonar, MP Ahmad Tavakkoli, and Tehran mayor Qalibaf also publicly protested the vetting. In one widely publicized case, a grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Eshragi, was disqualified after officials reportedly questioned neighbors about his personal life, including whether he prays, fasts, or smokes. Eshragi was later reinstated following significant criticism over his disqualification. Several incumbent Majles deputies were also disqualified, although most of those candidates were reinstated, including a reformist candidate who had earlier detailed to IRPO his anger in being vetted out. (Reftel).

7.(U) Following the loud criticism of the disqualifications, hundreds of candidates were reinstated by the Guardian Council and permitted to run. The Guardian Council spokesman told reporters that of the nearly 7,600 people who registered their candidacies for the elections, over 4,500 have been approved to run. Reformist officials have given the media varying estimates

regarding how many seats they can contest, ranging from 90-120 for the reformist coalition, and about 160 for the reformist National Trust (Karrubi's Etemad-e-Melli) Party, which is not part of the reformist coalition. It is clear, however, that reformists will not be competitive for all of the Majles seats.

8.(S//NF) Asked why the majority of the vetting of Majles candidates came from the Interior Ministry and not the Guardian Council as in prior elections, a former GC staff member indicated to IRPO that the change was only a cosmetic shift to improve the GC's public relations; the GC has not ceded any real authority. According to the source, the GC is trying to shift blame for vetting candidates away from itself, in the eyes of both the Supreme Leader and the Iranian public. In the 2005 presidential election, the Supreme Leader publicly rebuked the GC for vetting out all but one of the reformists running for the presidency, and the GC eventually reinstated two reformist candidates. The source explained that there is little difference today between the Interior Ministry and the Guardian Council, unlike under the Khatami administration when the two entities had ideological differences, and in fact, the GC is currently represented in the Interior Ministry Executive Councils. The contact explained that the 5th Majles (1996-2000) gave the GC the funds to extend its oversight of elections. The GC has one representative in each Iranian province, who also sits on the Interior Ministry's Executive Council for the province, thereby exercising authority that should be limited to the Guardian Council.

Beyond vetting - interference in elections

9.(S//NF) Contacts expect to see interference on election day from the IRGC and the Basij, although it is not yet known how extensive the meddling may be. It appears that the general public does not have confidence in the legitimacy of the process. The Interior Ministry will also be testing new electronic voting technology during the Majles elections, although hand counting will still be done alongside. (Note: This issue will be explored in more detail septel. End note.)

Looking toward the presidential election

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10.(C) The results of the Majles elections will be a good indication of whether the political trends are turning more toward the pragmatic and traditional conservatives (principle-ists) exemplified by Larijani, Qalibaf, and Rezaie, and away from the hard-liners associated with Ahmadinejad. In the December 2006 municipal elections, pragmatic conservatives fared best, but it is too early to determine whether those elections were indicative of a trend. However, if the trend continues in the Majles elections, it could carry through to the 2009 presidential election. Furthermore, cabinet members often are chosen from among the parliamentary leadership, which means the face of each parliament can shape politics for years to come. It will also be interesting to see the degree of support the reform candidates get, although it is clear they cannot retake the parliament.

11.(C) The Khatami-Karrubi-Rafsanjani and Larijani-Rezaie-Qalibaf alliances appear to have been created specifically to pool resources and coordinate strategies for the Majles elections. (Note: Karrubi always stays somewhat independent. End note.) Whether they remain in place in the lead up to the 2009 presidential elections remains to be seen. Rumors abound that Khatami is considering running for the presidency again; it appears unlikely that Karrubi will run again, and it is unlikely that Rafsanjani will try to challenge the constitutional age limit of 75. Many believe he has his sights set on the Supreme Leader position or at least a position

on the council he proposes as a substitute. On the conservative side, Larijani's candidacy for the Majles elections suggests that he does not have an eye toward the presidency in 2009. Some sources indicate that Rezaie doubts he could win an election and therefore will not run. At this time, it appears that Qalibaf is the strongest potential candidate of the latter group.

12.(C) However, Ahmadinejad apparently retains popularity with his core constituency, the religious poor, and could be re-elected. One Iranian political science professor predicted -- with regret -- that Ahmadinejad would win re-election, despite the dire straits that his economic policies have brought upon ordinary Iranians. Iranians, he said, are like people who keep buying lottery tickets, even though they have never won. Maybe this time, they say to themselves. It is that sentiment that would see Ahmadinejad re-elected, the professor said. In any case, the Supreme Leader's view of Ahmadinejad in 2009 -- as an asset or liability -- will undoubtedly impact the outcome of the elections.

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